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ABSTRACT

The problem of illiteracy is intergenerational. Many parents lack the skills, knowledge, and awareness needed to support their children's educational development. Our educational system must be changed so that it places equal priority on education for the child and on academic remediation for the parent. Family intervention programs do not address the undereducation of the parents. In family literacy programs, however, parents and children become teachers and learners. Functional context literacy, that is, relating the content of what is taught to the specific needs and goals of the individual learner, makes learning relevant to the goals of parents and children. The Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project, an outgrowth of the Parent and Child Education (PACE) program in Kentucky, provides individualized instruction and joint learning in elementary schools to parents and their preschool children. Parents sharpen their skills in reading, math, and language, and receive career counseling, student assessment, and employability skills instruction. Benefits include increased responsibility and improved parenting skills for parents, and increased maturity and cognitive growth for children. The Kenan Project results indicate that disadvantaged children and parents can be helped jointly in intervention programs. (SH)

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FAMILY LITERACY EDUCATION:

Replacing the Cycle of Failure With the Legacy of Success

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FAMILY LITERACY EDUCATION

Replacing the Cycle of Failure with the Legacy of Success

America is awakening to the tragedy and threat of illiteracy, the fact that tens of millions of its adults lack the essential literacy skills needed to survive and prosper in our increasingly complex society. New jobs are demanding ever increasing literacy competence at a time when workers with low basic skills continue to make up a disproportionate share of the workforce. Thus, added to the old democratic imperative of eliminating illiteracy as a means to helping all citizens realize their potential, there is now emerging an urgent economic imperative: to build a workforce that can compete in the global economy. The economic urgency has led national, state, and local policymakers, as well as corporate America, to join the search for solutions.

The Intergenerational Cycle

At the same time awareness of the economic relevance of literacy has increased, there is a corresponding awareness has emerged that the problem of illiteracy is intergenerational: adults who lack basic skills and children who are educationally "at risk" interlock, bound so tightly together that excellence in public school education is an empty dream for youth who go home in the afternoon to an educationally deprived household. Former Secretary of Education Bell noted that the current crusade works well for the top 70 percent of youth. A large reason it does not work for the other 30 percent - - the disadvantaged - - is that too many of their parents lack the skills, knowledge, and awareness needed to support their educational development.

"The Condition of Teaching" reported in 1988 that 90 percent of surveyed teachers felt that problems in education partially emanate from a lack of parental support. Teachers repeatedly made the point that they alone cannot bring excellence to education: Teachers need parents to take part in the school, support their efforts, and promote education at home. Yet, there are a growing number of parents - - parents on the lowest end of the literacy continuum - - who hear that message but live with the frustration of being unable to respond.

Parents who lack basic literacy skills cannot know the joy of reading a story to their children, and those children cannot reap the documented educational benefits of being read to. Parents who are embarrassed by their lack of literacy skills are often intimidated by schools, reluctant to become involved in their children's education even when they understand that it is critical to school success. Uneducated parents often have had no model for building a supportive environment for education, and their children cannot experience the success of their more advantaged counterparts.

By definition intergenerational illiteracy is a painfully long-term problem. It requires a long-term solution. The need for early-childhood education is becoming increasingly clear nationally. What is not so clear to everyone - - alas - - is that even the best efforts of the public education system to educate the Nation's poor youth will produce minimal success without the involvement of the family.

In 1987, one million children left public schools before graduation, most of them deficient in basic skills. There is no reason to believe that the patterns of the past will not hold in the future. Most of these dropouts will soon be parents, and they will often live with the frustration of being educationally and often psychologically incapable of properly assisting with their children's development. Furthermore, these will be parents whose lack of basic skills will preclude their getting or keeping a job, and that will contribute to their own stress and to the impoverished home environment of their children. "Family background variables - - and most importantly the mother's level of educational attainment - - are crucial determinants of the life chances of children." (Berlin and Sum, p. 44)

Children living in homes headed by women with limited formal education will start life and school behind their peers, and - - limited by oral-language and problem-solving skills - - these children will stay behind. Deficiencies in early oral-language skills affect their ability to read and write later. "..... Inadequacies appear to impair overall intellectual development, social skills and psychological development" (Berlin and Sum, 1987, P. 44). Conversely, children of parents who read to their children, have books in the home, have a positive attitude toward school, and have high achievement expectations tend to become higher achievers than the children of parents who do not. In other words, parents act as role

models for the literacy behavior of their children, and the children of those who are poor models find that each year they slip farther behind in school. For them school is not the key to opportunity but to failure, and they find it easy to drop out or get pregnant.

Thus, the number of children of children has increased to the point that one of every six babies born in the United States today will be the child of a teenage mother. Fewer than fifty percent of these mothers graduate from high school, and most will lack the rudimentary education necessary for employment or skill training. Many of these young mothers lack parenting skills, and many lack emotional stability, factors which contribute to their children's insecurity and instability. Lives bound by chaos do not lend themselves to normal growth and development. Deprived children, then, perpetuate the cycle of poverty and of inadequate education.

The cyclical dynamics of illiteracy demand that we change our educational system to place equal priority on education and academic remediation for the parent. Parents need help in overcoming their own life obstacles, and their children need services which help them compete successfully in the educational system with peers from more advantaged backgrounds. Unless we provide both, the intergenerational chains of undereducation cannot be broken. To break those chains, we need to intervene - - early intervention for the child, never-too-late intervention for the parents. Parents must be assisted in literacy development, and they must be provided with targeted services that help them support the development of their children.

Until recently, however, the needs of the disadvantaged parent have not been seen as the focal point for intervention. Rather, traditional programs have been child-centered. The theory was that a promising start in education would ensure a winning finish. When parents were involved, the focus was again on how they could teach their children or be involved in the P.T.A. Parents were encouraged to volunteer, to attend school meetings and functions, and generally to become more aware of their children's academic needs. Programs gave little attention to the parents' educational deficiencies, their own needs to master basic skills, and their needs for encouragement and support to build self-esteem and confidence.

Family education programs, however, have been evolving over the last several years, and many states are now providing broader support to parents. The recent Harvard Family Research Project recognized these efforts in "Pioneering States: Innovative Family Support and Education Programs." According to that report, Connecticut now funds ten Parent Education Support Centers. Maryland has established seven Family Support Centers and will expand to eleven Centers in 1989. Minnesota's statewide program, Early-Childhood Family Education, exists at 310 sites. Missouri provides parent education and family support services in every school district in the state through its Parents as Teachers program. The latter has elements similar to the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), which originated in Israel twenty years ago, spread internationally, and now operates in nine American states.

Each of these programs functions on the theory that the home is a powerful agent for improving the patterns of learning. They all promote the concept that disadvantaged children can learn, but that education is more than a school-based function. Parents and schools, together, help children form attitudes, establish habits, and acquire skills which lead to success in learning.

Evidence continues to accumulate that these family intervention programs facilitate the learning process of disadvantaged children. Most of these programs, however, stop short of addressing one major barrier to these children's development: the undereducation of many of their parents.

Fortunately, because the impact of parental education on children is so strong, and because the size of America's undereducated adult population is so large, a new, potentially powerful intervention - - family literacy - - has begun to emerge.

What is Family Literacy?

Family literacy programs are targeted interventions to break the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy by addressing simultaneously the educational needs of disadvantaged children and their parents who lack basic skills. Family literacy programs also provide

opportunities for shared learning and reading experiences that improve the literacy skills of the family and strengthen the support for reading in the home. Both parents and children become teachers and learners.

Thus, Family Literacy is an attempt to kill two birds with one stone - - meeting the educational needs of both parent and child - - and it is more than that. For the child family literacy programs offer opportunities well beyond those provided by traditional Head Start and compensatory education programs. The reading, writing, and computational successes of the parent have a ripple effect for the child. Parents who once thought that only teachers could teach acquire the power to involve themselves in their children's education, and the home becomes a place where education is more strongly valued.

For parents, too, family literacy programs can be more conducive to learning than general literacy and adult basic education programs. Literacy experts estimate that half or more of all adult basic education students drop out of their programs without achieving their goals or increasing their skills significantly. Typically they do so because they fail to see that what they are learning is relevant to their goals for themselves and their families. The frustrations of many students are voiced by a recent dropout:

> I came back because I needed to learn how to read my son's report card. The teacher wanted me to learn algebra! How is algebra going to help me?

In recent years, the notion of functional context literacy - - that basic skills are best taught not through a generic ABC's approach, but by relating the content of what is taught to the specific needs and goals of the individual learner - - has been increasingly accepted by adult education experts. Functional context literacy is now being explored widely in programs to promote workplace literacy. By tying parents' learning efforts directly to the future of their children, family literacy programs also make the adult education process more relevant to the adult learner. Family literacy programs recognize that developing one's literacy skills is motivational, that parent and child learning together can be an exhilarating experience that increases the determination of both.

Family Literacy is still in its infancy; but quality programs are emerging across the Nation. The El Paso Intergenerational Literacy Program, operated by El Paso Community College, is a bilingual program that serves Hispanic parents and their three- and four-year-old children. The programs operate at three elementary schools in a setting where parents are taught to help their children while simultaneously improving their own literacy skills. In addition, they are assisted with parenting strategies to help their children learn at home.

The State of Washington has also launched an outstanding effort in Family Literacy for the Mexican migrant farm families in the Yakima Valley. The program includes early-childhood education for the youngsters, ESL instruction for the parents who are in the process of legalization, and a strong parent-education component which helps parents understand the school and support education for their youngsters in the home. In order to meet the needs of family and community, the programs are working with the families in the evening hours and on weekends to accommodate work schedules. One hundred sixty students have been served in the program and it continues to grow. A joint project of the Citizens Education Center, N.W. and the Washington State Migrant Council, the program is funded exclusively through private foundation funds.

Another example of a Family Literacy program comes from Providence, Rhode Island. The Tutorial for Parents Program provides literacy instruction, counseling, and parent education to approximately one hundred parents of six- to fifteen-year-olds. The program uses computer-assisted instruction with both parents and children. One parent, about to complete her G.E.D., recently said, "I have learned how to use the computer along with my son. Before, I didn't know how to turn one on." Communication is a vital component of the program. Writing letters to each other has increased understanding between the generations.

The Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project - - a Close-Up Look

One of the Nation's largest family literacy programs is The Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project. The Kenan Program is an outgrowth of the Parent and Child Education (PACE) Program in Kentucky, cited recently as one of ten outstanding programs in the United States by The Ford Foundation and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

The Model brings undereducated parents and their preschool children together on a bus to an elementary school. At the school, both parent and child receive individualized instruction, and parents and children are brought together for joint learning. The program is intensive, consuming three full days per week for an academic semester. Currently, the original PACE Program operates in eighteen rural Kentucky counties. The Kenan Project - - using a slightly modified program model - - operates in urban settings in Kentucky and in both urban and rural sites in North Carolina.

As with other family literacy programs, the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Program is designed to intervene in the cycle of illiteracy by meeting the needs of parents and children in the following ways:

- By providing a strong preschool program to enable children of disadvantaged families to start kindergarten on a par with children from more fortunate families,
- By improving the basic literacy and employment skills of parents so they can achieve economic, educational, and social goals,
- By fostering among parents a capacity to play a teaching, guiding role that will increase their own self-esteem as parents and teachers and enable them to help their children learn when school is not in session,
- By showing parents how to make education a primary value in the home.

The final goal of the Kenan Program is to enhance parents' capacity to interact with their children's teachers and schools, enabling them to become true partners with the schools in their children's education.

Teachers and administrators, frustrated by attempts to reach the parents of children in academic crises, often assume that these parents do not care when they fail to return notes or visit

the schools. This is not necessarily the case. In the words of one Kentucky mother:

> If you send a note home to a parent, that parent is not going to come to school the next day, bring you the note saying, "I can't read this. I can't read." They're going to sit at home and ignore it. That teacher is going to tell you that the parent doesn't care. What that teacher doesn't know is that the parent may have cried because she can't read.

The Kenan Model speaks to this reality. The primary goal is to combine the needs of the parents and the children, improving the parents' basic skills and attitudes toward education while improving children's learning skills, uniting parents and children in a positive educational experience.

While the children are participating in the preschool program, parents are close by, sharpening their skills in reading, math, and language. These skills will enable many of them to earn high school equivalency certificates, if that is their goal. Vocational preparation through career counseling, student assessment, and employability skills instruction are included in the Kenan Trust Model. A specific time is set within the school day for parents and children to work and play together. The link is established for transfer of classroom skills into the home, and parents discover how to make learning fun while improving the child's oral-language and problem-solving skills.

> I didn't realize I could teach my children anything. I thought only teachers could do that. (A Kenan parent's comment)

It is important for the parents to realize that they are not dumb - - that being disadvantaged does not have to mean being ignorant. But often it does mean being intimidated by the school and discouraged by the lack of "school sophistication." To help overcome these barriers, the Kenan Model encourages the parents to become involved in the school organization. By volunteering in the school, they gain a new perspective and appreciation for the educational environment, and this also represents job experience. Parents who have never worked are often overwhelmed with pride and satisfaction at having completed the task of tutoring, clerical work, or library duties.

> I didn't think I could do anything. I volunteered in my son's kindergarten and now I think that after I get my GED I will go to school and become a kindergarten aide. (A mother in the Kenan Project)

Improved self-image and confidence are only two of the benefits of intergenerational learning in Family Literacy programs. Teachers in the Kenan Trust Family Literacy Project met in February, 1989, to receive more training and to conduct a formative evaluation of the programs. They reported the "most significant indicators of parent accomplishments" to be:

- **Indications of responsibility** - - parents are thinking about getting jobs, setting goals, becoming integrated into the community, accepting the role of participant in their own and their children's schooling, setting aside failures, and experiencing success;
- **Indications of increased parenting skills** - - parents are talking about a required understanding of the children and about how their own actions and words affect the children - - becoming role models for not only the preschool child, but for older children, as well; parents are reading books and encouraging the children to read them; they are learning the importance of being a teacher at home;
- **Indications of a new awareness of themselves as worthwhile adults** - - they are no longer afraid to try new things; they have begun to take risks and to enjoy success; they see school as a "safe place" and are making friends; they are developing a cultural awareness and appreciation for their community resources; they are learning how to trust, how to laugh, how to learn, and how to take pride in accomplishment.

The teachers expressed the following indicators of accomplishments by the children in the Kenan Project:

- **Indications of maturity** - - the children do not want to miss school, encouraging their parents to come and be here on time; they are more independent and do not cling to their mothers; they have learned to

share, take turns, borrow, and return; they are more in control of their emotions and their manners; they are dealing with change in a positive way;

- **Indications of cognitive growth** - - the children are becoming better thinkers, making choices and decisions, following through in activities with less direction, making more detailed plans and sticking with them longer;
- **Indications of affective growth** - - the children are developing more distinctive personalities - - they have learned to talk about their feelings, recognizing that they have legitimate needs to do so.

A final contribution of the Kenan Project will be to provide data and information on the impact of family literacy intervention. Because the Project has been established as a model, a full-scale evaluation is being conducted: to define the elements of the Model; to document the long- and short-term effects of the program on its participants; and to determine how relevant and transportable the Model might be in resolving the nationwide problem of intergenerational illiteracy.

Conclusion

Though evaluation of the Kenan Project will not be completed for several years, already there are indications of success - - both in Kentucky and in North Carolina. The Kenan Project, like other family literacy programs, shows that both disadvantaged children and disadvantaged parents can be helped jointly in intervention programs. When parents are encouraged to give learning a second chance, their children are given a chance as well; new opportunities open for both. Programs to break the intergenerational cycle of inadequate literacy show significant promise in addressing problems that plague a vast segment of the American population, problems that so far have been intractable.

The time has come for policymakers, along with educators of both children and adults, to come together and make quality family literacy programs a reality throughout the country. The gift of literacy is a great one for both parents and children; it is a gift we as a Nation cannot afford not to give.

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